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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/FO (CARPENTER)
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LONDON AND PARIS FOR NEA WATCHER

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [KPAO](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: US NGO REPORTS GOT HARASSMENT OF SAMIA ABBOU,
CIVIL SOCIETY

REF: A. TUNIS 595

[1](#)B. 06 TUNIS 816
[1](#)C. 06 TUNIS 1658
[1](#)D. 05 TUNIS 1006
[1](#)E. 06 TUNIS 730

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) GOT measures to limit civil society's activities seem to apply to international and local activists alike. Representatives of the American NGO Human Rights First and the international NGO Frontline Defenders met with Pol/Econ Chief and PolOff on May 23 to discuss their joint trip to Tunisia. On May 24, the NGO representatives accompanied Samia Abbou on a visit to El Kef prison. Samia's husband Mohamed Abbou is serving a 3.5 year sentence in El Kef for assault and "defamation of the judicial process." NGO representatives called PolOff to say they witnessed both Samia and Mohamed Abbou being hit by police during the aborted visit. Other human rights defenders they met with had tales of frequent police harassment. The two NGOs had difficulty carrying out a training session, apparently due to Ministry of the Interior pressure on the hotels the NGOs approached as training venues. End Summary.

Difficulties Conducting Internet Training

[1](#)2. (C/NF) Pol/Econ Chief and PolOff met with Natacha O'Brien, Protection Coordinator for the NGO Frontline Defenders, and Habib Nassar, a New York-based attorney with Human Rights First, on May 23 and discussed Frontline's and Human Rights First's joint trip to Tunisia and Internet freedom workshop. The workshop's training curriculum included a segment on how to circumvent government-sponsored internet controls. (Note: Either directly or indirectly, the GOT exercises control over all media outlets; see Ref A. End Note.)

[1](#)3. (C/NF) O'Brien and Nassar shared that they were forced to hold their regional internet freedom workshop for NGOs in Nassar's hotel suite. At last minute, they were told the conference room they reserved was unavailable due to a "flood" and "renovations." (Note: NGOs frequently hear such

excuses from conference venues whose management succumbs to pressure from the Ministry of Interior; see Ref B. End Note.) Despite multiple attempts to change venues, all the hotels they contacted told them no facilities were available.

Tunisian police prevented Tunisian participants from entering the hotel, though international participants attended the workshop.

Police Harassment of Mohamed and Samia Abbou

14. (C) Nassar called PolOff on May 24, after accompanying Samia Abbou to visit her husband Mohamed Abbou in prison. Samia Abbou pays weekly visits to her husband in El Kef prison, some three hours from her home. She frequently encounters an extensive police presence en route, especially when accompanied by international observers; see Refs C and 1E. End Note.) Nassar told PolOff the police broke up Samia,s visit with her husband, hitting Mohamed and Samia in the process. Samia Abbou told PolOff that there was a heavy police presence throughout the trip. She tearfully said police harassed both her and Mohamed, aborting her meeting with her husband after she barely had time to say hello. Despite the harassment, she said she would attempt to visit her husband again next week.

15. (C) According to Reporters Without Borders, Lassaad Jouhri, a member of the Association for the Support of Political Prisoners, was questioned by police on May 24 about his activities. Authorities reportedly dwelt on his plan to accompany Human Rights First, Frontline, and Samia Abbou to El Kef. Abbou supporters have previously been brought up on unrelated charges, but his lawyers say the actions are politically motivated. See Ref D.

GOT Harassment of Local Civil Society

16. (C) O'Brien and Nassar said other human rights defenders they met also had tales of frequent police harassment. For example, they spoke to Oussila Kaabi, a female Tunisian judge who, after helping form an independent judges association, was promptly reassigned from the capital to Gabes, 365 km away from Tunis. O'Brien said that Kaabi said the police routinely verbally abused her, referring to her as a prostitute. She said her children are harassed as well. O'Brien opined that due to police harassment, her long commute, and pressure placed on her family, Kabbi was "hanging on by a thread."

Comment

17. (C) Post was not surprised to learn that Samia Abbou encountered difficulties during this visit to El Kef. There is often a heightened police presence -- and police harassment -- when she is accompanied by international NGO observers. Neither were we surprised by the difficulties the two NGOs encountered while trying to carry out training for local civil society activists. What was instructive was the reaction of the NGO reps, who were visibly taken aback by their experience here, and the ill treatment of human rights defenders they witnessed first-hand. Their fresh take on the situation here, which they likened to that which prevails in Syria, serves to remind us that what often passes for "normal" in Tunisia is far from it. Post will explore, once again, with EU and like-minded diplomatic partners, whether any might be willing to jointly accompany Mrs. Abbou on a forthcoming trip. EmbOffs have also scheduled a meeting later this week with Mrs. Abbou. End comment.

GODEC